



Breastmilk Sharing

Know the risks

Feeding your baby

Your own breastmilk is the best way to feed your baby. When your milk isn't available, pasteurized donor human milk from a regulated milk bank is the next best choice, and then commercial infant formula.

Health Canada, the Canadian Paediatric Society, and KFL&A Public Health do not recommend informal milk-sharing because it carries risk.

The Breastfeeding Committee for Canada has encouraged more research and guidance on safe milk-sharing and home pasteurization.



What is pasteurized donor human milk?

Pasteurized donor human milk is milk donated to an official milk bank. This milk is treated to destroy any harmful bacteria or viruses, and maintains many of the beneficial parts of breastmilk. Donors are carefully screened, and the milk is tested before and after being treated to ensure its safety.

Due to a limited supply, pasteurized donor human milk is usually available only for premature, ill, or high-risk infants.

What is informal milk-sharing?

Informal milk-sharing is the practice of sharing human milk between family, friends, a milk-sharing website, or purchased online. This milk usually isn't treated to destroy any harmful bacteria or viruses that may be present, and donors are only screened informally. Wet-nursing (directly breastfeeding a non-biological child) is another type of informal milk-sharing.

If you're thinking about giving your baby milk from an informal donor, talk to your health care provider first to discuss the risks and benefits of all infant-feeding options.



If you decide to feed your baby breastmilk from another family, do not accept milk from a donor who:

Remains anonymous

Is at risk for HIV or has had a sexual partner at risk for HIV in the past 12 months

Is a chronic or heavy user of recreational drugs, cannabis, alcohol, tobacco (including nicotine patches or gum), or e-cigarettes.

Do not purchase breastmilk online. It is a high-risk source of breastmilk: sellers may not be fully transparent about their health histories, medications, or other important factors.



Risks of sharing breastmilk informally

It's difficult to know for sure that a donor's health and lifestyle are safe

Viruses such as HIV could be passed to your baby (the donor may not know that she has these viruses)

If human milk is not collected, stored, and transported safely, bacteria could grow and make your baby sick

Tobacco (including nicotine patches or gum), alcohol, cannabis, some medications (prescription and over-the-counter), herbal supplements, and recreational drugs pass into breastmilk, which could harm your baby

Milk may be diluted with water or cow's milk, or something else may be added

Minimizing the risks of informal milk-sharing

If you decide to accept breastmilk from another family, reduce the risk to your baby by learning about the donor and practicing safe milk-handling.



Learn about the donor

Know the donor's general health and lifestyle. The donor should be in good health and only on medications that are safe for breastfeeding. You can check the safety of different substances at mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets-parent.

Know the donor's blood test results. Donor blood tests should be recent and reviewed by a health care provider to check that the donor is negative for viruses such as HIV.

If the donor is a close family member or friend, the risk of sharing may be lower. However, some mothers find it difficult to ask lifestyle questions of family members or friends, and donors may not share the information you need.

Limit the number of donors.

Have ongoing contact with the donor; face-to-face is best.

Practice safe milk-handling

Work with the donor to ensure the milk is expressed, stored, and transported as safely as possible.

Wash hands and equipment thoroughly before expressing milk.

Express milk by hand with a clean pump.

Breast pumps do not need to be sterilized.

Store milk in clean glass containers, BPA-free plastic containers, or breastmilk storage bags. Use a dishwasher to clean containers, or wash them by hand in hot soapy water, rinse, and dry them with paper towels or let them air dry. Containers do not need to be sterilized, but should be completely sealed with some space to allow for milk expansion during freezing.

To thaw, place frozen milk in the refrigerator overnight, run the container under warm water, or set it in a larger container of warm water. Freezing breastmilk in small amounts allows for thawing at each feeding.

Avoid microwaving or refreezing human milk.

Breastmilk storage guidelines

Location	Temperature	Maximum recommended storage
Room temperature	16 to 29°C (60 to 85°F)	4 hours
Refrigerator	4°C (39°F)	4 days
Freezer	Below -18°C (below 0°F)	6 months

Home pasteurization

In-home heat treatment (“flash heating”) will not eliminate the risks of informal milk-sharing, and is not the same as the pasteurization method milk banks use. It may reduce the risk of potentially harmful bacteria and viruses.

Careful pasteurization (at home or through a milk bank) does not destroy the beneficial parts of breastmilk. Most nutrients are undamaged, and a few are reduced by the heat. Over- or under-heating the milk can cause problems.

Instructions:

1. Place the human milk (50 to 150mL) in a heat-resistant glass jar.
2. Place the jar in a small pan of water, ensuring the water is about two fingers above the level of milk.
3. Heat the water on the highest level of a stove until it reaches a rolling boil.
4. Immediately after the water comes to a boil, remove the jar of milk from the boiling water. Leaving the water to boil for too long will damage some of the nutrients in the milk.
5. Place the jar in a container of cool water, or let it stand to cool until it reaches room temperature.
6. Place a clean lid or small plate on it as it cools and while in storage.
7. Feed your baby this heated milk at room temperature within 6 hours, or store safely in refrigerator or freezer.



For more information

Get breastfeeding help from KFL&A Public Health:
kflaph.ca/Breastfeeding

Find out about pasteurized donor milk at the Rogers Hixon Ontario Human Milk Bank:
MilkBankOntario.ca

Health Canada's position on the safety of donor human milk:
Canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/food-nutrition/healthy-eating/infant-feeding/safety-donor-human-milk-canada

Best Start's guide to expressing and storing breastmilk safely:
<https://resources.beststart.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/B35-E.pdf>

Information about the safety of using different substances while breastfeeding:
mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets-parent